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# The Opacity of Fictional Minds: Transparency, Interpretive Cognition and the Exceptionality Thesis

*Marco Bernini*

The primacy of vision as a paradigm of knowledge is deeply rooted in Western cultures. As Hanna Arendt notes in *The Life of Mind*, ‘the predominance of sight is so deeply embedded in Greek speech, and therefore in our conceptual language, that we seldom find any consideration bestowed on it, as though it belonged among things too obvious to be noticed’.<sup>1</sup> Having resisted eminent attacks in the last century, a significant ocularcentrism is still detectable in many disciplines dealing with epistemological concerns.<sup>2</sup> Observations of processes, contemplations of truths, inspections of experiences, reflections on events are still largely considered (often metaphorically) foremost procedures for acquiring knowledge in many fields. Despite its limitations, which can develop nonetheless into theoretically fertile resistances, the ubiquity of visual models might have the benefit of fostering cross-disciplinary debates and mutual enrichment on common conceptual ground.

That is the case, this essay will argue, with an optical metaphor that unites cognitive science and narrative theory in conceptualising the epistemic accessibility of the mind in

terms of its *transparency*. Optical metaphors proliferating in both areas include the concept of ‘focalisation’ or ‘visual field’ in narratology and the concept of ‘introspection’ (etymologically a ‘looking within’) in cognitive psychology.<sup>3</sup> Among such metaphors, the ‘transparency of the mind’ is in fact a shared optical image to describe the accessibility of cognitive processes and phenomenological experiences. This seeming terminological convergence, however, conceals important differences and potential confusion about what it is transparent to whom, or what higher or lower degrees of transparency imply in terms of accessibility.

Since a number of distinct uses of the transparency metaphor can be discerned in cognitive science and narrative theory, I will therefore pluralise it by referring to different *transparencies* of the mind. Cognitive science speaks of a transparency of the mind in at least two kinds of cognitive scenarios.<sup>4</sup> One is the so-called transparency of self-knowledge or *self-transparency* (T1). This is the cornerstone of the ‘Cartesian epistemology’, according to which we have direct, non-mediated access to our own mind and mental states (beliefs, desires, conscious thinking, sensations, emotions).<sup>5</sup> The mind is therefore said to be transparent *to itself* because (if and when) the contents and qualities of mental states are introspectively *fully accessible* to the experiencing subject. A second condition of transparency to which cognitive science has paid particular attention is in relation to outward perceptual experiences where, inversely, transparency indicates the introspective *inaccessibility* of phenomenal states or their ‘*phenomenal transparency*’ (T2).<sup>6</sup> When looking at the colour blue, the classic example goes, we can just attend to the colour blue and not to the experience itself because we *see through* the process channelling that experience. Here the higher the transparency of the experience, the lower its accessibility.

Both assumptions have been recently disputed or substantially revisited by new strands in cognitive science, which advocate that perception and self-knowledge are instead

inherently *opaque*. Within this alternative account of the mind, encompassing a range of perspectives that I will group and present in the next section as the ‘interpretive cognition’ framework, transparency is considered just an illusory *feeling* resulting from the positive outcome of successful interpretive mechanisms coping with a vast array of opaque stimuli in inner cognition and outward perception. Drawing on the hypotheses raised by the ‘interpretive framework’ of cognition, and especially on its reappraisal of inner transparency (Transparency 1), this essay aims at addressing, refining and reassessing an equally recent debate in narrative theory about the transparency of fictional minds. From one side of the fence, a longstanding and foundational claim about fictional minds’ transparency suggests that literature is unique insofar as it allows – unlike real-life cognition – transparent access to multiple minds *from the inside* (T3). The origin of this view is Dorrit Cohn’s seminal study, *Transparent Minds* (1978) – a title which programmatically foregrounds the accessibility problem. Cohn’s central idea is that narrative fiction ‘depends on what writers and readers know least in life: how another mind thinks, another body feels’.<sup>7</sup> Narrative fiction, in this view, is unique in providing a transparent access to hidden inner states of other minds (beliefs, desires, conscious thinking, and so on) – a kind of inner accessibility to other minds that is precluded in real-life cognition.

On the other side, a new wave of cognitive narratologists has criticised this view as flawed by a Cartesian conception of the mind as internal and private. As Brian McHale notes, in defence of Cohn’s account, ‘[o]ver the course of the past decade, Cohn has been turned into a kind of straw-man (or straw-woman, I suppose) to be set up and knocked down in arguments about fictional minds and the relative advantages of classical versus post- classical accounts of mind in fiction’.<sup>8</sup> Among others, David Herman has countered by dubbing Cohn’s position the ‘Exceptionality Thesis’, insofar as it assumes ‘that only fictional narratives can give us direct, “inside” views of characters’ mind’.<sup>9</sup> This is not the case, Herman argues,

because, as enactive and embodied approaches to the mind argue, the mind is neither ‘closed off’ from the world nor limited to its internal states and processes. In Alan Palmer’s words, traces of ‘the whole mind’ (either actual or fictional) are distributed into visible (and readable) actions and behaviours and therefore the mind is transparent also *from the outside* (T4).<sup>10</sup>

The extension of the transparency of the mind into the outside world *and* storyworld has undeniably enlarged and enriched the study of actual and fictional minds. However, this should not come at the price of downgrading the complexity of the inner life and cognition, or their fictional representation. In sympathy with the post-classical approaches that criticise Cohn’s view, I build on post-Cartesian or anti-Cartesian cognitive science (the ‘interpretive framework’) to defend and reassess the exceptionality of fictional transparency. I will suggest that fiction remains exceptional precisely in disclosing what Peter Carruthers has called the ‘opacity of mind’: the constant activity of interpretive processes running at the level of inner cognition and outward perception.<sup>11</sup>

The next section elaborates upon the two instances of transparency in cognitive science and explains their relevance for narrative theory. In parallel, I present counter-arguments from the ‘interpretive framework’ of cognition, which advocates that the mind’s transparency (T1 & 2) is an illusory *feeling* and that cognition is interpretive in nature, constantly mediated, and rife with opacity. With a particular focus on moods and introspective opacity (conditions in which the embodied, anti-Cartesian dimension of cognition is particularly relevant), in the last section I use Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (1899) to show how narrative fiction can transparently bring these interpretive processes to the fore (T3); either when this mediation is unperceived by the experiencing character or when opacity becomes perceptible also to her. In the conclusion, I propose a visualisation of my reappraisal of the Exceptionality Thesis displaying how, notwithstanding the important

insights coming from its post-classical critiques, narrative fiction remains exceptional in conceding *transparent access to the opacity of fictional minds*.

### **Transparencies and the ‘Interpretive Cognition’ Framework**

Interpretive accounts of cognition can significantly modify each of the transparencies identified in cognitive science and narrative theory. Beginning with *self-transparency* (T1), we have seen that this Cartesian view about the functioning of our own mind assumes that, in Carruthers’s synthesis, ‘[k]nowledge of one’s own thoughts... (one’s beliefs, judgments, desire, hopes, fears, decisions, and intentions) is supposed to be especially intimate, direct and reliable’.<sup>12</sup> We are all familiar with this intuitive feeling of being able to introspectively access and know our own thoughts or emotions as if they were objects to be directly ‘looked at’, without any interposing layer mediating the process. In his *The Opacity of Mind*, Carruthers collects evidences from Chinese, Indian and other cultures suggesting that this ‘intuition of non-interpretive access to our own thoughts and thought processes’ is so widespread to appear as a ‘human universal’<sup>13</sup>.

For ‘interpretivsts’ such as Carruthers, however, the intuition that minds are transparent to themselves is ‘radically mistaken’.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, he suggests that access to our own mind is always ‘sensorily mediated’ and ‘equally interpretive in character’, and that the mind is therefore *opaque* to itself.<sup>15</sup> The feeling of transparent access is just an epiphenomenon of our interpretive machinery that makes us perceive the access to our own mind as direct and effortlessly non-inferential, while we are instead constantly dealing with inchoate mental and bodily stimuli. Carruthers puts forward a fascinating hypothesis for the creation of this interpretive by-product: the mind redirects towards itself the same mindreading module we use to ascribe intentions, beliefs, desires, and motivations to other people. In his words, ‘the same mental faculty that evolved for reading the minds of others

and negotiating the social world gets turned toward the self, issuing in knowledge of our own thoughts'.<sup>16</sup> In coping with the epistemological opacity of our own mind, Carruthers says, we *mindread* ourselves. It is clearly a special kind of mindreading, since in addition to the same external, contextual and bodily stimuli through which we can interpret other minds we have a private unique set of available information. As Carruthers concludes, in comparison to our externally directed mindreading, 'self-knowledge can then rely on anything that is accessible through the same sensory channels, including one's own behavior and context, but also one's own visual imagery, inner speech, felt affect, and other forms of sensory experience'.<sup>17</sup>

Carruthers is not alone in adopting this view. Among other 'interpretivists'<sup>18</sup>, the cognitive neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga has been accumulating convincing empirical evidence with split-brain patients which suggests that most of our conscious life is the outcome of explanations from 'post hoc information'.<sup>19</sup> In Gazzaniga's words, 'we live with a *slight tape delay* on what our brains are doing', and therefore we interpret our actions and feelings by constructing meaningful coherent stories as 'post hoc explanations using post hoc observations with *no access to nonconscious processing*'.<sup>20</sup> For Gazzaniga, this post hoc storytelling activity is neurologically conducted by what he calls 'the interpreter', a specific area located in the left hemisphere of our brain.<sup>21</sup> This left-hemisphere interpreter 'constructs theories to assimilate perceived information into a comprehensible whole'.<sup>22</sup> Together with (and possibly complementing) Carruthers's hypothesis of a redirected mindreading module, the interpreter is an alternative candidate for the meaning-making activity through which the mind seeks to interpret its opacity.

It is important to stress that, whether by mindreading or by using our left-hemisphere, such interpretive activity occurs mostly in the background of our conscious awareness. Whenever interpretative processes are successful (but not necessarily correct), the opacity is *explained away* and the feeling of transparency thereby preserved. Having said that, there are

several examples of consciously experienced disruption to self-transparency. Carruthers and Gazzaniga mostly refer to psychopathological or neurological conditions to exemplify this disruption. Unlike them, Thomas Metzinger links the problem of self-representation to its transparent quality, suggesting that even emotions can produce a breakdown of the transparent representational glass. In short, Metzinger claims that our sense of self consists in a transparent representational model operating in the background of our experience. Certain kinds of emotions, in this respect, can ‘allow a representational system to experience itself *as* a representational system’.<sup>23</sup> Every time we experience emotions that fail to match the transparent representational model of our self (and of our self in the world), the mediated, interpretive, opaque nature of our existence comes to the fore. These states of what Metzinger calls ‘phenomenal opacity’ are anything but rare in literature, as we shall see in Kate Chopin’s short novel, and the special kind of transparent access to these opaque states in narrative fiction is central to my own thesis about its exceptionality.<sup>24</sup>

Moving to *phenomenal transparency* (T2), we come to a kind of transparency occurring between the mind and the experienced world. Also defined as the ‘transparency of experience’,<sup>25</sup> the first optical formulation of this view is famously attributed to G. E. Moore; for Moore, that ‘which makes the sensation of blue a mental fact seems to escape us: it seems, if I may use a metaphor, to be transparent – we look through it and see nothing but the blue’.<sup>26</sup> In other words, there are no qualities or phenomenal states to introspect in our perceptual experience of the world but the experienced world itself. Commenting on Moore’s passage, Sarah Paul rightly notes how ‘Moore’s sense of transparency is thus the opposite of the Cartesian notion. Far from being self-intimating, the mental sensation of blue is here declared to be nowhere to be found.’<sup>27</sup> Whereas in self-transparency the optical metaphor is used to point at a maximum degree of introspective accessibility, in the context of our sensory relationship with the external world it alludes to the impossibility of experiencing



what (if anything) lies between ourselves and the object of our experience. As Metzinger says, revisiting self-transparency and perceptual experiences in terms of ‘phenomenal opacity’, in relation to our experience of the outside world ‘[t]ransparency is a special form of darkness. With regard to the phenomenology of visual experience transparency means that we are not able to see something, because it is transparent. We don’t see the window, but only the bird flying by’.<sup>28</sup> Like self-transparency, though, the window is there, interpretivsts would claim, and it can get unexpectedly dusty.

To explain the opaque nature of the window as well as its habitual transparency in perception, Jacob Hohwy – another important voice within the ‘interpretive cognition’ framework – resorts to a probabilistic and inferential model of the mind. Hohwy suggests that every time our mind engages with the environment, it makes predictions about incurring stimuli based on an internal model of the world and of the possible causes and events within it. What happens next, for Hohwy, can be characterised like this: ‘[i]f the prediction is correct the model is supported, if not then the model parameters must be updated or another model chosen. Perception is then driven by the models that best predict the sensory input at any given time.’<sup>29</sup> According to this perspective, through the window we see a bird because we *predict* a bird, and ‘conscious perception is viewed as the *upshot of unconscious inferences*’.<sup>30</sup> The unconscious quality of the prediction and its simultaneity with the incurring stimulus are crucial aspects for not intending perceptual inferences as some sort of conscious reasoning taking place after the perceptual event. On this point, Hohwy makes very clear that ‘this is a theory of perception, not of conceptual or semantic elaboration of perception. It is not that we have a certain coherent perceptual experience that we through Bayesian inference get to label ‘bicycle’, say. The *very perceptual experience itself* is driven by the unconscious inference’.<sup>31</sup> Since this predictive process is usually very effective, and

our mind is incredibly efficient in updating its own models, the presence of this predictive (that is, interpretive) mechanism is usually *transparent*.

This is why we do not live our lives with the exhausting feeling of incessantly interpreting an ever-changing world. Perceptual stability is the norm, and ‘actual variability is not salient to us because unconscious inference normally goes smoothly’.<sup>32</sup> But once again, this perceived stability and the related sense of an absence of interpretive layers is just a feeling. What the mind actually does is deal with inchoate perceptual information, simultaneously transformed into meaningful experiences. As with phenomenal transparency, then, there are potential breakdowns of usually diaphanous processes, with a consequent disclosure of the opacity inherent to our mind. Importantly, Howhy’s theory of predictive processing has the ambition of accounting also for emotional states and, together with perceptual events, it can profitably enlighten the representation of emotional episodes in fictional narratives, such as Kate Chopin’s story, where upheavals in emotional transparency give way to a sustained feeling of unknowing.

How and to what extent can this recent reappraisal of the transparency of the mind within cognitive science, which favours an interpretive view of cognition, affect its conceptualization within narrative theory? First, if we rethink Cohn’s view – call it *fictional minds’ transparency* (T3) – in the light of the ‘interpretive cognition’ framework, then we can obtain, I argue, a more precise and specific hypothesis about what is exceptional in the literary representations of cognition.<sup>33</sup> To say that fictional minds are exceptional because we can access them, unlike real-life cognition, *from the inside* does not say enough about *what* kind of cognitive process we are accessing. In addition, this simplified view seems to imply that, as soon as we are granted entrance, everything we find should be a Cartesian crystalline architecture of directly accessible mental states (transparently accessed by the character). Admittedly, both Cohn’s view and Herman’s counter-thesis are more complex than that, and

they acknowledge a degree of uncertainty and self-interpretation.<sup>34</sup> Yet the resulting dispute keeps revolving around the (inner or outer) transparency of fictional minds, rather than on their opacity. By defending and expanding Cohn's position, I want to suggest that the transparency of fictional minds as usually conceived describes only the quality of the gateway, leaving the degree of visibility *within* the mental territories unspecified and unexplored. Reworking Cohn's optical metaphor, the translucent involucre that allows a reader to enter fictional minds' cognition is just a first surface, disclosing the (either consciously perceived or unconsciously running) interpretive layers operating within the fictional mind's opacity (and here the possessive points at the beholder's, not at the reader's accessibility).

Once we acknowledge this as a unique quality of narrative fiction, the objection that fictional minds are also accessible *from the outside* appears weakened or positively complementary. In the latter spirit, Lisa Zunshine refers to the outer accessibility of fictional minds in terms of '*embodied transparency*' (T4) to describe fictional passages 'putting protagonists in situations in which their bodies spontaneously reveal their true feelings, sometimes against their wills'.<sup>35</sup> If not rare, this type of bodily transparency suitable to mindreading is not the norm in narrative fiction, as Zunshine herself readily admits. This does not mean that the inside presentation of the interpretive processes dealing with inner and outer opacities cannot be related by the reader to outer reactions, bodily signals and environmental conditions, or that all these externalities cannot constitute stimuli to be processed by a fictional mind's interpretative apparatus. David Herman is particularly acute on this point, stressing how, especially in modernist literature, fiction often presents the 'tight coupling between the mind and world, the nexus between intelligent agents and the environments they seek to navigate'.<sup>36</sup> Markers of this nexus are undeniably accessible from outside, inferentially triggering intentional assumptions about which mental state a person is

undergoing at a specific moment in a specific (story)world situation. Granted this, the complex functioning of the interpretive mechanism operating *within* the mind itself, despite being world-involving (both in T1 & T2), is largely invisible from the outside, and often unperceived by the very experiencer. As we are about to test in the following section, though, narrative fiction is capable of revealing its functioning and breakdowns, and one of its central interests appears rather to be the very point where feelings of transparencies are perturbed or assailed by the throes of opacity.

### **Affective Patterns, Moods, Perceptions: Opacity and the Interpretive Mind in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening***

Modernist literature is usually regarded as subverting the epistemic confidence in the possibility of acquiring knowledge of one's self and of the surrounding world. As Philip Weinstein notes, defining the paradigm that modernist fiction aims to attack, '*coming to know*, gradually refining one's identity within orientational space and linear time, is the bread and butter of Western fiction'.<sup>37</sup> The present continuous tense shaping this definition points to the progressive aspect of the epistemic trajectory. The same tense, in the title of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (a text from the early modernist period), points more at the dynamic and sustained process of *coming to unknow* – despite the novel having a sort of tragic epistemic fulfilment. Of the difficult protagonist's transition (or awakening) from a previous, socially conforming identity to a new, unstable self, the novel represents mostly the growing opacity and cognitive vertigo opened up by the first half of the transitional arc of her main character, Edna Pontillier. The story is textured neither by punctual epiphanies and discrete moments of understanding, nor by contingent suspensions of mental transparencies. It is rather a careful rendering of the gradual onset of opaque states in her mind, largely triggered by unsettling bodily feelings and harbouring emotions that Mrs. Pontillier struggles to

interpret. In other words, the novel portrays how self-transparency or phenomenal transparency might not be glasses that suddenly break, but windows that slowly get enfeebled by progressive (and progressing) gusts of opacity. As the fabrication of the transparent model of the self (T1) or of the world (T2) is a temporal process, so is their deterioration, discarding, or substitution.

An account of emotions as temporally unfolding events, significantly involving bodily states, is crucial to an understanding of the representation of mind's opacity in *The Awakening*. Surprisingly, affective science has mostly regarded emotions as small-scale events, as momentary and corollary to our cognitive life. In Giovanna Colombetti's words, 'emotions and moods of the affective scientist are usually temporary episodes that take place in an otherwise affect-free mind... they remain surface phenomena of an otherwise affect-free mind'.<sup>38</sup> Drawing on the conceptual toolbox of dynamic system theory, she suggests that we should instead think of emotions as 'dynamic patterns'.<sup>39</sup> Without entering into the complexity and richness of Colombetti's arguments, in what follows I endorse two main tenets of her view: first, that emotions are temporal events, with a trajectory and unfolding patterns (call it *affective patterns*); second, that these patterns largely involve bodily states and changes in our perceptual experiences. Importantly, given the role of emotions and bodily states in self-knowledge (T1) and perceptual experiences (T2), I suggest that temporal dynamics and unfolding patterns are key aspects also of the growing opacity of Edna's mind.

Since the temporal unfolding of opacity is central to my reading, I will present my reading of it linearly, from the beginning to its tragic end. The novella, narrated in the third-person by an external narrator, is the story of Edna Pontillier, faithful wife of a businessman with whom every summer she leaves New Orleans to spend the season on Grand Isle. The novel is set in the particular summer in which she meets Robert, the son of a seasonal neighbour within the small summer community of Grand Isle. This encounter slowly

develops into an unfulfilled passion that will lead Edna to commit suicide. Recasting the story in the terms of the present discussion, the plot can be described as the gradual deterioration of Edna's self-transparency, with related changes in her perceptual experience. Recalling Metzinger's definition of transparent representational models, after encountering Robert the transparent models (of her self, of her marriage, and of the social world) that previously worked smoothly in the background of her existence progressively become ineffectual.

As the narrator tells us when introducing Edna, a tension within her was something she had long been acquainted with, and at 'a very early period she apprehended instinctively the *dual life* – that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions' (13; emphasis mine). The first encounter with Robert, even if eventless and involving pure bodily proximity, already establishes an unrecognised crevice in her mental model of a conforming life. Consequently, the inward life will soon gather states of opacity that must be questioned. Having met Robert, in fact, she comes home and then, after a habitual reproach from her husband about the care of their children, she starts to cry without apparent reason: '[s]he could not told why she was crying. Such experiences at the foregoing were not uncommon in her married life' (6). Subsequently, we are given access to the inner and bodily counter-part of this external reaction, and the first blow of opacity that her interpretive inner machinery (now manifesting itself) is unable to process:

*An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul's summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not seat there inwardly upbraiding her*

husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path, which they had taken. She was just having a good cry all to herself. (6; emphasis mine).

As we have seen in Carruthers's critique of self-transparency, external behaviours and proprioceptive felt affects or bodily states are among the raw material that our mind interpretively processes. When interpretation fails, the transparency is disrupted and we become aware of the actual opacity lying within ourselves. In this passage, this suspension of transparency is channelled by Edna's bodily feelings, whose interpretive resistance defeats descriptions and leads to vague analogical images ('like a shadow, like a mist') which attempt to make sense of this unfamiliar state. Cohn, it should be said, already noted how often in narrative fiction 'the mental activity bypasses not only self-articulation, but also self-understanding'.<sup>40</sup> Consistently with my reading of the analogic sentences in this passage, Cohn also added that the arising of self-opacity (my terms) is directly proportional to the increase of what she calls 'psycho-analogies' – analogic images that either the character or the narrator associate to these unspeakable states.<sup>41</sup>

The opaque state that Edna finds impossible to describe would be defined phenomenologically as a 'mood'. In phenomenology, 'mood' is a specific term that translates Heidegger's concept of *Stimmung*.<sup>42</sup> In Matthew Ratcliffe's synthesis, 'moods constitute a sense of belonging to the world. They do so by revealing the world as a realm of practical purposes, values, and goals'.<sup>43</sup> Normally moods are unperceived, transparent, acting in the background of our consciousness and they play an important role in our sense of familiarity with our self (T1) and with the world (T2). If and when this familiarity is broken, Ratcliffe elucidates, moods can reveal themselves negatively as opacity, as 'an absence of warming familiarity, of significance, of belonging'.<sup>44</sup> This definition and functioning of mood highly resonate with Edna's description. The sense of familiarity and of purposefulness that was

guaranteed by previously effective transparent models, or by an unproblematic sensory mindreading, turns into an opacity to which she can refer only psycho-analogically. As Colombetti points out, a key difference between moods and emotions is that they have a longer ‘duration’, constituting in this respect a sort of affective ground for emotions and longer affective patterns.<sup>45</sup> Proprioceptive bodily signals can become perceptible traces of this affective ground whenever a mood resists interpretation for lack of effective emotional models. As Hohwy argues, ‘unexpected changes in arousal and bodily state create discrepancy with existing generative models of emotions and bodily sensations, and different revisions of the models are then explored in an attempt to minimise discrepancy.’<sup>46</sup> The novel will stage the impossibility of Edna closing this gap between new emotions that escape previous models of interpretation and the exploration of alternative models to make sense of them. At this particular moment, though, Edna has yet to recognise this emergence of an opaque mood as the beginning of an affective trajectory. Yet it will soon reveal its influence by (dis)orienting Edna’s actions, forcing her mind to experience several interpretive battles with opaque states.

A first example of inexplicable actions within her new affective pattern occurs when Robert invites her to the beach: she ‘could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined, and in the second place have followed in the obedience of one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her. A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her’ (13). Edna’s impulse to deny the invitation is driven by her previous transparent model of self and social behaviour. Liberating new models of possible worlds and identities are slowly ‘beginning to dawn dimly within her’ (a further psycho-analogy) but, as the narrator glosses, ‘the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing’ (13). In Gazzaniga’s terms, the ‘post-hoc explanations’ that the ‘interpreter’ in our mind concocts to provide us with



motivations for our actions seems to fail in Edna's mind. She finds her actions preceding her, unexplained, with a sense of intentional agency altered and diminished. From an 'interpretivist' perspective, she becomes aware of the 'slight tape delay' with which our lives are lived, of the interpretive nature to what we usually take to be more intimate and direct. Towards the end of the novel, once the tragic affective pattern is about to conclude, Edna experiences a similar delay in relation to her thoughts, too, when she finds herself walking 'in an absent-minded way, as she had walked one night at Grand Isle, as if her thoughts *had gone ahead of her* and she was striving to overtake them' (111; emphasis mine). This equal treatment of thoughts and actions in the novel coincides with Carruthers's idea that the interpretive access to our own mind recruits and processes a vast array of sensory stimuli from external and internal sources – and, consequently, that the opacity resulting from the jamming of our interpretive tape might come from both sides.

As the affective pattern unfolds, Edna is increasingly finding herself introspectively attending to incomprehensible and ever-changing proprioceptive bodily feelings, from oppression ('[a] feeling of oppression and drowsiness overcame Edna during the service. Her head began to ache, and the lights on the altar swayed before her eyes' [35]) to exultancy ('a feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given to control the working of her body and her soul' [27]); from longing for Robert ('the thought of him was like an obsession... reviving again with an intensity which filled her with an *incomprehensible* longing' [54; emphasis mine]) to a rapid alternation of conflicting emotions within a short period of time ('there were days when she was very happy *without knowing why*. She was happy to be alive and breathing...[t]here were days when she was unhappy, *she did not why*, -- when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead' [58; emphasis mine]). Because of this sensuous representation of a defeat of rationality and introspective clarity, *The Awakening* was regarded by one reviewer at the

timeas ‘unhealthily introspective and morbid’.<sup>47</sup> Introspection, however, can be considered not just an attitude of Edna’s mind, but a proper theme within the novel.

For instance, at the beginning of the narrative a friend of Edna asks her, ‘[o]f whom – of what are you thinking?’. She first replies ‘Nothing’, before adding: ‘[h]ow stupid! But it seems to me it is the reply we make instinctively to such question... Let me see. I was really not conscious of anything; but perhaps I can retrace my thoughts’ (15-16). This scene interestingly recalls a recent introspective methodology within cognitive science, the Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES), where a subject wears a beeper that goes off randomly a few times each day, and she is asked to record what she was thinking at the moment of the beep.<sup>48</sup> Edna’s friend functions like a human beeper, and her answer is nicely consistent with DES research in suggesting a weak awareness in cognition of occurring thoughts and a structural difficulty in retracing them. For most of the novel, however, we are located within Edna’s *spontaneous* introspective activity, naturally triggered by bodily feelings and free from the task of reporting them – and this is an important difference of fictional accessibility over scientific external study of mental states.

Introspective moments of self-opacity are not the only condition in which we are able to trace Edna’s affective pattern. Briefly touching the second kind of transparency (T2), her perceptual experiences also change as the opacity unfolds. Even if these changes in phenomenal transparency mostly fall behind Edna’s conscious awareness, their presence is a sign to the reader of the interpretive nature of her perception – and of their accessibility, another privilege of narrative fiction over real-life cognition. For instance, after her first encounter with Robert, the meeting continues unconsciously (but evidently) to orient her perceptions, when she feels the ‘breeze *soft* and *languorous* that came up from the south, charged with the *seductive* odour of the sea’ (12; emphasis mine). Later, when Edna is on the boat with Robert and a former lover of him, her unconscious jealousy makes her perceive the

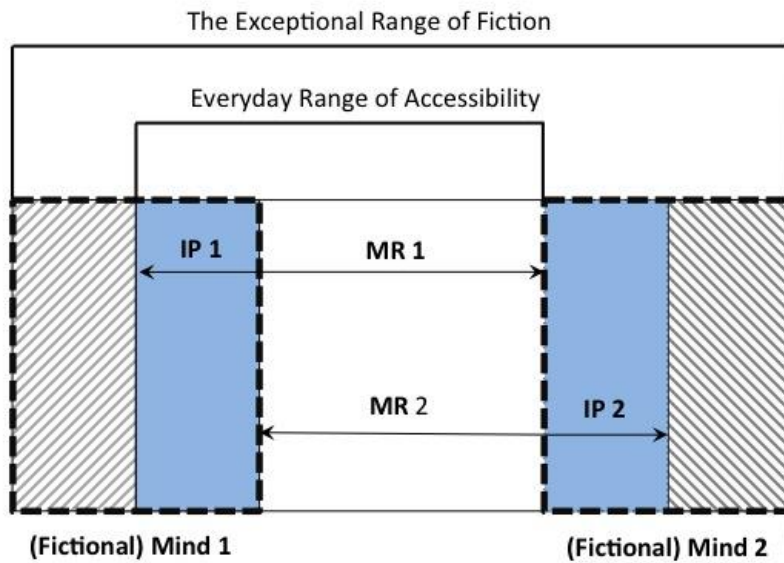
sun as ‘beginning to *bite*’ and the ‘*swift* breeze seemed to Edna to *bury the sting* of it into the pores of her face and hands’ (34; emphasis mine). In the latter passage, Edna consciously perceives the world as hostile, but she is unconscious that her mind is interpreting perceptual stimuli this way. According to Hohwy’s interpretive account of cognition, perceptions and emotions both rely on models of the world that mediate perceptual or emotional experiences. In *The Awakening*, each progressive deterioration in self-transparency (T1) evidently affect Edna’s perception (T2); and as soon as a former model of her self is no longer capable of interpreting her inner states, she undergoes changes in her perceptual model of the world. Once again, the inextricable link between epistemic models of the self and perceptual models of the world remains unconscious to Edna, but hinted at by the narrator when he tells us that ‘she could only realise that she herself – her *present self* – was in some way different *from the other self*. That she was seeing with different eyes and making the acquaintance of new conditions in herself *that colored and changed the environment, she did not yet suspect*’ (40; emphasis mine). In line with the ‘interpretive cognition’ framework, knowledge not only of her own mind (T1), but also of the world, comes to Edna in an always mediated fashion (T2).

What Heidegger eloquently point outs about the perception of sounds can therefore be extended to all perceptual experiences when he affirms that ‘[w]hat we ‘first’ hear is never noises or complexes of sounds, but the cracking waggon, the motor-cycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the fire crackling’.<sup>49</sup> This is a list of successfully mediated perceptions but (as with Edna’s experience) sometimes we might be devoid of effective models for our self and emotions. Consequently, a mounting opacity in self-knowledge can unconsciously manipulate our interpretive processes in perception. Worse than perceptual instability, however, is the extreme scenario in which our mind gives up interpretations entirely. After a sustained confrontation with inner and outer opacities (with previous models discarded and without any reliable new model to make senses of them),

Edna ends up in a sensory and attentional inertia, as a sign that her interpretive mind has dangerously stalled. Interpretive processes, even when failing, are vital tools of a quest for meaning. At the end of her affective trajectory, instead, Edna's mind has ultimately succumbed to opacity and ceased to interpret. In the final scene of the novel, after Robert has definitively left, she is walking on 'down to the beach, rather *mechanically, not noticing anything special* except that the sun was hot. She was *not dwelling upon any particular train of thought*' (114). Soon after that, she will drown herself into the ocean.

Thanks to the exceptionally transparent accessibility that fiction concedes to the progressive damaging of Edna's transparencies and to the mounting trajectory of her opacity, we can internally evaluate even this extreme action as a meaningful end of her affective pattern. From the outside, the temporal unfolding of mental opacity – with its complex, gradual and interlinked influencing of self-knowledge and perception – leading to this tragic ending would have been, I argue, impossible to infer or mindread.

## **The Exceptionality Thesis Reassessed**



To conclude, here is a visualisation of my reassessment of the Exceptionality Thesis in the light of what the ‘interpretive cognition’ framework claims about mental transparencies. In summarised form, my argument is that, notwithstanding the important insights of post-classical approaches to the mind, narrative fiction remains exceptional in allowing *transparent access to the opacity of fictional minds*. By drawing on interpretive accounts to self-transparency and phenomenal transparency, I have shown how narrative fiction is able to represent a fine-grained rendition of the processes mediating cognition and perception. Importantly, fiction can do this either when interpretive processes are consciously perceived as such by the character (call it *conscious opacity*) or when processes are running in the background of his or her awareness (call it *unconscious opacity*). In addition, narrative fiction not only can guarantee access to different kinds of opacities and transparencies (T1 and T2), but it can also represent the entanglement and mutual influencing between them, as in Edna’s mind. Importantly, as I have explained by building on the concept of emotions as ‘dynamic

patterns', another core feature of this exceptionality access is the understanding of the temporal unfolding of emotional states and self-knowledge. Not secondarily, as displayed in the visual model of my reappraisal of the thesis, narrative fiction extends all these privileges to multiple minds.

In the model, we have two minds sharing a world, either real or fictional. In everyday cognition, if you are one of the two minds (say Mind 1), you have a transparent access only to your own interpretive processes (and only when they become opaque). However, as Herman and others suggest, through our mindreading faculty (MR 1 and 2) we also achieve a certain degree of transparency of Mind 2. Nonetheless, even by mindreading another mind we never access its internal interpretive processes. Reframing my thesis in a negative way, *we can never transparently access the inner opacity of another mind*. The exceptional range of accessibility of fiction, instead, enables us transparently to enter both minds' interpretive processes (IP1 and IP2) as well as to experience the reciprocal mindreading activities. In conclusion, if cognitive approaches to fictional minds rightfully maintain that the mind has a certain degree of transparency in the outside world, my contention is that only fiction gives access to *multiple internal opacities* and to the interpretive nature of cognition.

This revaluation of the opacity of fictional minds in relation to mental transparencies, together with cognitively reassessing the Exceptionality Thesis, can pave the way to future research on the narratological modes of representation of opaque states and of their varieties (with a particular attention to the embodied nature of interpretive cognition). Additionally, a better understanding of the narrative treatment of self-transparency and phenomenal transparency (and of related opacities and interpretive processes) can ultimately provide tools also for cognitive and phenomenological research. This would endorse Alva Noë's suggestion that '[t]he work of some artists can teach us about perceptual consciousness by furnishing us with the opportunity to have a *special kind of reflective experience*. In this way,

art can be a tool for phenomenological investigation'.<sup>50</sup> This is another thesis, even more exceptional, that cognitive approaches to literature can hopefully investigate further.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Hanna Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1978), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> For an edited collection surveying critical perspectives on the primacy of vision in twentieth-century philosophy see David Michael Levin (ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For a more specific focus on French phenomenology see Martin Jay, *Downcast eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> For a cognitive reformulation of Gerard Genette's concept of 'focalisation' in terms of 'visual field' see Manfred Jahn, 'Windows of Focalization: Deconstructing and Reconstructing a Narratological Concept', *Style* 30 (1996), pp. 241-267. On different accounts of introspection in philosophy of mind see Cynthia Macdonald, 'Introspection' in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Brian McLaughlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 741-766.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the many different meanings of the concept in contemporary philosophy of mind see Sarah K. Paul, 'The Transparency of Mind', *Philosophy Compass* 9 (2014), pp. 295-303.

<sup>5</sup> See Peter Carruthers, 'Cartesian Epistemology: Is the Theory of Self-Transparent Mind Innate', *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 15 (2008), pp. 28-53

<sup>6</sup> Among alternative ways of defining transparency in perceptual experience, here I am drawing on the label provided in Thomas Metzinger, 'Phenomenal Transparency and Cognitive Self-Reference', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Science*, 2 (2003), pp. 353-393.

<sup>7</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 5-6.

<sup>8</sup> Brian McHale, 'Transparent Minds Revisited', *Narrative* 20 (2012), p. 117.

<sup>9</sup> David Herman (ed.), *The Emergence of Mind: Representation of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 87-124.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Carruthers, *The Opacity of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Carruthers, 'Mindreading the Self' in *Understanding Other Minds: Perspectives from Developmental Social Neuroscience*, eds. Simon Baron-Cohen, Helen Tager-Flusberg and Michael V. Lombardo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 467-485.

<sup>13</sup> Carruthers, *The Opacity of Mind*, pp. 25-32.

<sup>14</sup> Carruthers, 'Mindreading the Self', p. 467.

<sup>15</sup> Carruthers, *The Opacity of Mind*, p.1.

<sup>16</sup> Carruthers, 'Mindreading the Self', p. 467.

<sup>17</sup> Carruthers, 'Mindreading the Self', p. 467.

<sup>18</sup> The 'interpretive cognition' framework I am presenting should not be restricted to the cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind mentioned in this essay. Another important 'interpretivist' view on self-knowledge and its relation to the apparent feeling of transparency, for instance, can be found in Jordi Fernández, *Transparent Minds: A Study of Self-Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> See Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Mind's Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Michael S. Gazzaniga, *Who's in Charge: Free Will and The Science of the Brain* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2012), pp. 74, 77 (emphasis mine).

<sup>21</sup> For a concise presentation of the various functions of 'the interpreter' and of the constructive nature of cognition see Matthew Roser and Michael Gazzaniga, 'Automatic Brain – Interpretive Minds', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 13 (2004), pp. 56-59.

<sup>22</sup> Michael S. Gazzaniga, *The Mind's Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Metzinger, 'Phenomenal Transparency', p. 362.

<sup>24</sup> Metzinger, 'Phenomenal Transparency', p. 354.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Tye, 'Representationalism and the Transparency of Experience', *Noûs* 36 (2002), pp. 137-151. For a critique of Tye's account as too narrowly focused on visual experience (and, importantly for my own argument,



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not on bodily states and emotions) see Amy Kind, 'What's So Transparent About Transparency', *Philosophical Studies*, 115 (2003), pp. 225-244.

<sup>26</sup> George E. Moore, 'The Refutation of Idealism', *Mind* 48 (1903), p. 446.

<sup>27</sup> Paul, 'The Transparency of Mind', p. 296.

<sup>28</sup> Metzinger, 'Phenomenal Transparency and Cognitive Self-Reference', p.358.

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Hohwy, 'Phenomenal Variability and Introspective Reliability', *Mind & Language*, 26 (2011), p. 268.

<sup>30</sup> Hohwy, 'Phenomenal Variability', p. 268 (emphasis mine).

<sup>31</sup> Hohwy, 'Phenomenal Variability', p. 268 (emphasis mine).

<sup>32</sup> Hohwy, 'Phenomenal Variability', p. 272 (emphasis mine).

<sup>33</sup> For an important reflection by Cohn on her use of 'transparency' as distinguished from other accounts considering 'transparency' as a mimetic quality of the narrative medium see Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 163-181.

<sup>34</sup> Cohn was ready to recognise that fictional characters frequently undergo states of uncertainty and lack of understanding about their own feelings and perceptions (as discussed in the next section). Similarly, David Herman repeatedly hints at the importance of self-interpretive moments within fictional minds' cognition; see his 'Cognition, Emotion and Consciousness' in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* ed. David Herman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 245-259.

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Zunshine, 'Theory of Mind and Fiction of Embodied Transparency', *Narrative*, 26 (2008), p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> David Herman, 'Re-Minding Modernism' in *The Emergence of Mind*, ed. Herman, , p. 264.

<sup>37</sup> Philip Weinstein, *Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 3.

<sup>38</sup> Giovanna Colombetti, *The Feeling Body: Affective Science Meets the Enactive Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*, pp. 53-82.

<sup>40</sup> Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, p. 42.

<sup>41</sup> Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, pp. 43-48.

<sup>42</sup> Originally rooted in the musical domain (in the idea of 'tuning' a musical instrument), its translation into English as 'mood' is now generally accepted. For problems in translating the concept see the translators' footnote in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robison (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 172-173.

<sup>43</sup> Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Beings: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 47. See also Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Why Mood Matters' in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger's Being and Time*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 157-176.

<sup>44</sup> Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Beings*, p 66.

<sup>45</sup> Colombetti, *The Feeling Body*, pp. 77-82.

<sup>46</sup> Hohwy, 'Phenomenal Variability', p. 271

<sup>47</sup> The review is from '100 Books for Summer', *New York Times* 24 June 1899, collected in Kate Chopin, *The Awakening: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Margo Culley (New York: Norton and Company, 1994), p. 169.

<sup>48</sup> Russel Hullburt and Eric Schwitzgebel, *Describing Inner Experience? Proponent Meets Skeptic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 207.

<sup>50</sup> Alva Noë, 'Experience and Experiment in Art', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 7 (2000), p. 123; emphasis mine.